

10 Things You Should Consider When Choosing a College

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Sure, you know that the best schools enroll students with the best grades and the highest test scores. You also know that there are some college names that impress more on a sweatshirt. But how can you figure out which school is right for you? There are some important things to consider when you decide where to apply for and enroll in college. Many people don't spend much time thinking about them, though, and sometimes end up unhappy as a result, even at so-called "great" schools. By taking the time to think about these things now, you'll be able to home in on what really matters to you and find the fit that's right.

1. Size

Colleges come in all sizes, from a school in California that enrolls only 26 students to schools like Pennsylvania State, which can enroll 30,000 or more. Which one is better? Well, that depends on you and what you're comfortable with. Did you go to a small high school or a large one? Did you like the size of your high school? Did you grow up in a city or a rural area? Do you like being places where everybody knows you, or do you like the anonymity of a crowd?

2. Type

All colleges are not the same. Some have large graduate programs and devote much of their time and resources to research. Others enroll only undergraduates and focus their attention on teaching and learning. Some schools have a specialty in one specific area, like engineering or writing, while others are best known for giving their students a broad education. Other differences include whether schools are single sex or coed, if they have a religious affiliation, and whether they are public or private. There are also historically black colleges, schools with co-op programs where you earn money while going to school, and schools with large evening and part-time programs. The options really are almost limitless.

3. Location

There are colleges in every living environment you can imagine, from tiny towns in Minnesota to the middle of New York City. If you have always lived in the suburbs, choosing an urban campus can be an adventure. But after a week of urban noise, dirt, and rude people, will you long for a grassy campus and open space? On the other hand, if you are used to the suburbs and mall life and choose a college in a rural area, will you run screaming into the Student Center some night looking for noise, lights, and people? Think about where you grew up and how much of a change you want from that when you go to college.

4. Distance from Home

Closely tied to location is the issue of how far from home you want to be. For some people, going to college is a chance to explore a totally different part of the country. For others, they want to make sure they can have dinner with their family once a week, or go home to do their laundry. When you decide how far you want to be from home, think about how likely you are to get homesick, and how much money you can afford to spend in travel. The farther you are from home, the less often you'll be able to visit. On the other hand, with email and cell phones, you can still feel close to home even if you're in California and your sister is in New Jersey.

5. Cost/Scholarships & Financial Aid

Cost is one thing that most *parents* think about when the topic of college comes up, but did you know that not all colleges cost the same amount? Or that there are different types of financial aid at different schools? Or that if your grades - or musical talent or athletic ability - are good enough you could earn a scholarship?

Public universities often offer much lower tuition rates to in-state students, but their fees to out-of-state residents are usually pretty similar to private schools. Private institutions charge everyone the same high tuition, but they often have privately-funded scholarship monies available, so it's worth applying to them even if the price tag seems too high.

6. Student Population

All college students are not the same. Some schools, particularly large schools and those in big cities, tend to have students from a wide range of ethnic, socioeconomic, and religious backgrounds. Other schools, especially small schools and those in very rural locations, tend to have a fairly homogeneous student body. Other things to think about in student population are whether most students live at the school or commute, how old the average student is, and how many students are in the Greek system, if there is one.

7. Majors and Requirements

If you know what field you want to go into after college, it's important to make sure you go to college somewhere that will prepare you for your chosen profession. Some schools are particularly well known for a specific major, like pre-med or architecture. Going to one of these schools will put you in a great position to get a job in that area when you graduate. If, however, like many entering freshman, you're not so sure what you want to do, you should choose a school that will give you plenty of options.

Some schools require students to take classes in a wide range of areas during their first year or two. These schools are great for students who either want a well-rounded education or are trying to figure out what area to focus on. Other schools let students just dive in to their chosen majors without a lot of other requirements. These schools are great for focused students who know what they want to do and don't want to spend their time in classes that won't help them in their major.

8. Athletics and Events

Are you a sports nut, or does the sound of a marching band and the sight of a football uniform make you cringe? At some schools, sports are the order of the day, the main social activity on most students' calendars. Other schools may not have a football team at all, or may not pay much attention to it if they do.

Maybe you're really into going to live concerts, or you love nothing better than to go hiking in the woods. If you like to spend your free time going to shows at clubs, you probably won't be happy at a small school in the countryside where few musical acts stop on tour. However, if you love to be outdoors, a campus in a natural setting can give you just the kind of balance you need to feel your best.

9. Activities and Special Programs

Have you always wanted to try living in another country? Some colleges have special programs to help you do just that, for a semester or even a whole school year. You'll usually get full credit for your work overseas, plus have the chance to learn a new language, make some new friends, and try some new food. Or maybe you're a dancer or a journalist. You'll want to make sure you go to a school that not only fulfills your academic goals, but your personal ones, too. Some schools have great arts and theater programs, or excellent newspapers, giving students a chance to be involved in extra-curricular activities outside their majors. Other schools focus all their attention on great classes, but not much else.

10. Your Gut Feeling

Trust your instincts. If a place feels right, that's important. Similarly, if it just feels wrong, no matter who wants you to go there or how good it looks on paper, it probably is. College is a very personal choice, and after considering all the other objective factors, the fact of the matter is that it comes down to you. Visit colleges you're interested in, and see how you feel walking around their campuses. Could you imagine yourself going to school there? Once you find a few places that you like, you'll be well on your way to finding the college that's right for you.

Good luck, and happy hunting!